ORAL HISTORY FILE 011 – STEWART LEE

Stewart Lee came as a 4 year old from Manchester to Fairbridge with his three brothers, 11 year old Syd, 9 year old Graham and 8 year old Ian Bayliff, arriving in Sydney in March 1955. Stewart was to stay at Fairbridge for 13 years.

This interview was recorded in Gloucester House at Fairbridge Farm Molong on February 9, 2006

HILL: Stewart, can you tell us what you know about your early childhood, your family in England, and how you came to Australia?

LEE: Well, I don't know too much about that. My eldest brother knows all about that sort of stuff. I know very little about it. Bits and pieces of the boat . . .

HILL: How old were you?

LEE: Four.

HILL: What have you found out subsequently about how you came to be coming to Australia?

LEE: Well, basically . . .

HILL: What's your understanding of the situation?

LEE: Well, really you can't put a, you can't really blame your Mother or your Father about it because whether they thought it was right or not is another story. Mum clams up anyway when we used to talk to her about it. She's dead now. But Dad – I'll never see him again - so the only one that would be able to answer that is Sid because he actually talked to Dad about it.

HILL: Okay, so Sid would know more about it, but what's your understanding of the circumstances? Were they persuaded that it was a better life for you?

LEE: Well, that's what I think it was. Because they were told we had horses and we had push bikes and all this sort of stuff, or what there was about five horses and there were about two hundred-odd kids. You were lucky to have a push bike – I did have one – but the other push bike I had, it had no bloody tyres or nothing on it. It had a stick for a steering wheel.

HILL: Do you have any recollections of leaving England and the journey out?

LEE: Very little. Very little.

HILL: What are your earliest recollections of Fairbridge?

LEE: Oh, basically when we actually got there they like, stripped the clothes off that we were all given to come out here with, like the nicely dressed sort of things, and the fact that they separated me from my brother straight away. Like, Graham was in the same Cottage . . .

HILL: Roughly, how old was Graham?

LEE: Sid was eleven I think, Graham was nine, I think it was, yeah.

HILL: So you were four, you were with your nine year old brother and Graham was nine and Sid was eleven and he went to another Cottage.

LEE: Yeah, and Ian went to another Cottage. We were separated on the first day, so basically it was sort of traumatic in itself . . .

HILL: So you were split up. What are your earliest memories of being at Fairbridge after that?

LEE: Oh well, basically of a morning getting pulled out of bed, put under the shower. The first morning it ever happened, which was the day after we arrived, we got this cold shower on and I didn't know what the hell was going on. I had to just get under it and I wouldn't get under and anyway, they actually held me under there. And that was . . .

HILL: Who's "they"?

LEE: I can't remember who the boys were – they were told to hold me.

HILL: By the Cottage Mother?

LEE: By the Cottage Mother, yeah. Very cold. Bloody cold.

You had to go out of a morning and pick up chips . . .

HILL: Pick up chips – what are chips?

LEE: Chips of wood for the heater.

HILL: So you did this every day, all day?

LEE: Yeah, it was my job because I didn't go to school.

HILL: On your own?

LEE: Yeah. I was too young.

HILL: So, you're four years of age and there's nobody looking after you and you just go out all day collecting chips of wood.

LEE: Or sitting down on the septic tank just looking down the road. There was nothing else to do.

HILL: Do you remember how you felt about Fairbridge then?

LEE: Not a great deal, like it's bits and pieces.

HILL: In those early years, did you miss your Mum?

LEE: Yeah, and my Dad. And I knew I had sisters and it's hard to say how I really felt.

HILL: Did you expect to meet up again with your Mum and your Dad?

LEE: Yeah. Because you'd talk to other kids and they'd say yeah, your parents are coming out and picking us up and all this. Most of the kids said the same. They thought they were there on a big holiday and then they'd go back. Which didn't eventuate, of course. It was a bloody big con.

HILL: So, any other recollections before you went to school? Do you remember going to Fairbridge Primary School?

LEE: Well, I used to follow the kids up to, as far as the woodpile, then they'd have to go and I'd have to go home and start picking up chips. But my first case of school – I was excited of course, because I'd be with the other kids, I wasn't on my own – and went through Kindergarten, went up into first class, didn't like that because you had to do sums and everything, so school in my books - and I went back to Kindergarten and then went on and just carried through school.

HILL: Did you enjoy Primary School? You said you enjoyed it because you were with the other kids.

LEE: Yeah, I would have enjoyed it. I didn't like the square dancing and all that. But other than that, the sport, the playing around and everything else - yeah. I actually enjoyed Primary School.

HILL: And then you went to Secondary School? At Molong? Did you enjoy that?

LEE: Yep. I liked being with the other kids of course, because that's what I think a lot of people don't understand, we were in one little segregated mob like a little family. That's what we were. And we relied on each to watch each other's back when we were there. We always got looked down on, of course. By Molong kids and everyone else.

HILL: And the staff?

LEE: By staff of course. There was a couple of good ones amongst them but not many.

HILL: Why did they look down on Fairbridge kids?

LEE: Well, I don't know, their idea is you're basically waste, you're probably been kicked out of your home or whatever the case, they get their own ideas. They don't know what went on, but they get their ideas that you've been kicked out or you're from broken families and that, which most of the time we weren't.

HILL: So you didn't mix with the Molong kids much?

LEE: No. There was a few I did but they were in the same sort of bloody boat as we were, only with their own family. So, you know, they're the sort of people that I mixed

with more than the average Molong kid because the average Molong kid thought he was better than we were.

HILL: When you were in Primary School, did you leave the Farm much at all?

LEE: No. I don't think I ever did. The only times was when Woods took us into swimming or something like that.

HILL: Into the Molong Baths?

LEE: Yeah, that's about it.

HILL: But of course, most of the time you would have gone to the dam on Fairbridge.

LEE: That's right. Yeah.

HILL: I'm trying to think when one Sunday a month they had the church service in Molong, that would be another one.

LEE: Yeah. But as I say, that's going with the bus with the kids.

HILL: That's right. So you would have stayed with the Fairbridge kids. So you didn't have much to do with people outside of Fairbridge?

LEE: No. That's what it basically was – little England in itself. Because we were segregated from England once you go past that gate. And that was it.

HILL: And at Primary School age you hardly ever went into town, but if you did, you only went as Fairbridge on the bus and came back with Fairbridge.

LEE: That's right. And the thing about it is, and this is what a lot of people don't seem to realise, that's why we kept our accents and that for so long, because we were still talking to other English kids. And we weren't talking to Australian kids. Simple as that.

HILL: Did you have any friends who were not Fairbridge kids?

LEE: Teddy Glasson . . .

HILL: At Molong school?

LEE: At Molong High, yeah. Stapleton – yeah, three or four. And that's only because they were in the same class as we were. Which was known as the "dumb class", 1G, 2G.

HILL: How many people were in 1G, 2G?

LEE: I don't know because it was all Fairbridge kids. And a couple of Molong kids or Manildra kids. And that was the thing.

HILL: And what did you do in the 1G, 2G classes?

LEE: Oh, the same as anyone else, like in 1A or 1B. But we were like, we weren't expected to pass. Put it that way. That's basically why you were in 1G or 2G. You weren't expected to pass. And being Fairbridge, you were automatically put in there. So if you had any potential whatsoever, you weren't going to go nowhere anyway. Because Fairbridge was exactly the same. They didn't let you get your own potential. Like there were kids that were artists and everything else there, they wouldn't let them get to their potential. And this is what goes on.

HILL: Why not – because they needed them on the Farm?

LEE: Basically.

HILL: And they thought that all that stuff, if you could be a farmer, you didn't need all that stuff?

LEE: Yeah, a farmer's wife and everything else.

HILL: So, you're in 1G, 2G, and you were there until what age?

LEE: Fourteen. Fourteen and a half as they used to put it.

HILL: What happened then – you left school?

LEE: Pulled out.

HILL: Who pulled you out?

LEE: Woods.

HILL: What did he say?

LEE: He said, "Your time for dairy, Lee." And that was it. And I was pulled out.

HILL: Do you remember what time of year it was?

LEE: September was my birthday . . . about April or May I think. Something like that.

HILL: Before the May holidays?

LEE: Yeah.

HILL: And you became a trainee?

LEE: Yeah.

HILL: How long were you a trainee? Until you were seventeen?

LEE: Eighteen.

HILL: You stayed until you were eighteen – why?

LEE: Newberry made me stay back because they had no trainees. See, I was one of the few more experienced ones there.

HILL: So, by this time, we're talking about the mid-sixties? So the numbers of kids coming out from England are in decline, and the Australian kids who were then coming to Fairbridge, they were taken by their parents when they were of school-leaving age, because they could work? So Fairbridge is running out of trainees?

LEE: That's right. They were running at a loss as far as trainees were concerned. Because we actually ended up there, there was like Cathy Gardener was in the kitchen instead of one of the boys because we needed the trainees.

HILL: Roughly, when you went up to dairy, can you remember roughly how many trainees were left?

LEE: Well there was Barney on the farm, Percy, me, Bubbles Scott and Robbie Henderson were on the dairy . . .

HILL: How long did you work on the diary?

LEE: Well, where they used to alternate . . .

HILL: That's right, every month.

LEE: Well, no, I was on dairy all the time.

HILL: Was that right?

LEE: Yeah.

HILL: Were you still milking twice a day?

LEE: Yeah, twice a day, thirty-five cattle.

HILL: What, three in the morning, three in the afternoon?

LEE: Yeah.

HILL: Seven days a week?

LEE: Yep.

HILL: Did you get a day off?

LEE: No.

HILL: How long did you do that for?

LEE: Ah, 'til I left. I did kitchen for a little while and then basically it went Barney was farm, I was dairy, and Ian Dean was kitchen.

HILL: And this is when they got down to just a handful of trainees?

LEE: Yeah.

HILL: Tell me about your day and your week on dairy. What time did you get up?

LEE: I'd be up at about three, go out, get the cows in, get them in, milk them . . .

HILL: Now you had four bays with machines or did they all have machines?

LEE: Four bay milker, yeah.

HILL: Did you – you couldn't hand-milk the other two bays, could you?

LEE: Yeah. We had two hand-milking bays. I used to run the four-bay and Bubble and Robbie Henderson did the hand-milking. And then I had to go out and do the separating . . .

HILL: This is separating the milk from the cream?

LEE: Yeah. I was the . . .

HILL: And this was on the dairy, wasn't it?

LEE: Yeah, they had like, head of the three of us, I suppose, Bubble – Bubble was Bubble, and Henderson was just not worth worrying about.

HILL: So you finished the Milk about what time – six, seven?

LEE: Six, yeah. You had to be finished at six and we could get the milk on the cart to go down the village.

HILL: Who took it down?

LEE: Usually Robbie or Bubble.

HILL: And you cleaned up because you were the head of the gang?

LEE: Head of the gang, yeah.

HILL: You had to clean up the dairy and hand-milk and, presumably Bubble or Henderson would do picking-up?

LEE: Yep. That's right.

HILL: And then you would go down for breakfast?

LEE: Yep.

HILL: Did you get down in time for breakfast, or were you after . . .

LEE: No, we were always after the other kids had finished. Yes. Because it took too long to milk.

HILL: Well, I was on a gang of six and we had about fifty milkers . . .

So, you came down and you had breakfast?

LEE: Yeah.

HILL: Where did you have breakfast?

LEE: Usually in the hall.

HILL: But there was only you there?

LEE: Yeah – well, me, Bubbles and Robbie Henderson. We'd come in and our porridge was on the stove. And it always used to float around in there because they used to put the sugar on and just put it on the stove. So you got floating porridge. If there was anything left over from the staff, like . . .

HILL: Just a second . . . so you came out of your breakfast of porridge, now what about the hot meal? Did you cook up something for yourself or did they cook it up for you?

LEE: No, if there was a couple have cold eggs or something left over from the staff, we used to eat that. And it was . . .

HILL: That would be cold. Did you heat that up or . . . ?

LEE: Didn't have time because then it was back up the dairy again.

HILL: And what did you do in the morning when you got back up there?

LEE: Well, Robbie Henderson and Bubbles Scott used to go over to the piggery and do the piggery, I scrubbed down the bails . . .

HILL: So, you'd come down for lunch and that would be when the Primary School kids would come down?

LEE: Sometimes later they were there, but most times the same time as us.

HILL: So, after lunch, you had a bit of time?

LEE: Yeah, that was 'til about half past two when we'd head back up to dairy.

HILL: For the afternoon Milk?

LEE: For the afternoon Milk.

HILL: Did you try to get a kip then?

LEE: Well, yeah, tried but well, basically, you didn't have the time to really do it because you'd sit down and try and relax and half the time you got the Cottage Mother walking in and saying, "Out of the bedroom, you're not allowed here. You're not allowed there." Which the Cottage Mothers always did. So, you just tried to get a break wherever you could.

HILL: You went back and then did the afternoon Milk? And how long would that take?

LEE: Yep. You'd be finished that by about five. Cleaned the bails down, cleaned the separating room down, wash up the cans and so you'd be heading back down to the village by about half past five, quarter to six.

HILL: So, you were pretty well on the go from three o'clock in the morning 'till six o'clock at night seven days a week?

LEE: Seven days a week.

HILL: How long did you do that for?

LEE: A few years, until I was eighteen anyway.

HILL: Were you keen to leave Fairbridge?

LEE: I suppose in one aspect, yeah, in another, I was unsure of myself. Because to leave there, you had your little sanctuary, whereas, once you're out that gate you're unsure of yourself because of the fact that you've never been taught anything else. All you know is to get up, go for dairy, get up go here, get up go there.

HILL: Were you happy at Fairbridge?

LEE: I was quite happy, in my own way.

HILL: What were the best memories, the best times you had at Fairbridge?

LEE: Well, the best times I suppose would be whenever we'd get a break and go down the creek or somewhere like that, or up the dam . . .

HILL: What would you do at the creek?

LEE: You'd boil a Billy of tea, probably get a couple of Magpies from up the back of Gowrie Cottage, cook them up. Any other sort of bird we could catch, cook them up. It didn't matter. You were allowed three matches I think it was, if you didn't light the fire in three matches, you had no fire, did you? Yeah.

HILL: What else did you enjoy doing?

LEE: Oh, sport and all that sort of thing. In sport I was quite happy. Basically swimming was my most favourite sport of the lot and . . .

HILL: Where did you swim?

LEE: That was in the pool, that was competition swimming in Molong.

HILL: Did you enjoy swimming at the dam?

LEE: Oh yeah, loved it in the dam. I don't know, a lot of people don't like swimming in the dams, but I did.

HILL: Look, just back on the dairy, did you do this seven days a week?

LEE: Yeah, seven days a week. The only part about that, you were exempted from church. Only because you'd miss church because you were still up the dairy.

HILL: And you did this for over two years?

LEE: Oh yeah. It was fifteen with me, Bubbles Scott and Robbie Henderson took over dairy, so it would be three years.

HILL: Can you remember leaving Fairbridge?

LEE: Yep.

HILL: What happened?

LEE: I forget the bloke that drove down from [unclear].

HILL: Who found you the job?

LEE: Apparently Newberry.

HILL: Who was now the Principal of Fairbridge.

LEE: Yeah, he had found me a job at Tottenham, out in the middle of nowhere. And my last words to him when I went out the gate was, "No-one will ever stand over me again."
And he said, "It's not the attitude to take." And I said, "Well, it's my attitude and that's all there is to it." And with that, out the gate I went.

HILL: What do you remember about how you felt at Tottenham?

LEE: Well, up there in Tottenham, and this is what a lot don't understand, is you're put out in the middle of nowhere – as far as they were concerned, they owned us. There was no "if you" or "by your leave". They owned us. In other words, we were there to [unclear] whenever they wanted us to do things. And that's the way they used to run it.

HILL: Slaves?

LEE: Basically, yes. Slave labour. Whatever you want to call them.

HILL: Were you lonely?

LEE: Yeah, because the family didn't talk to me and I didn't talk to them, anyway.

HILL: Where did you sleep?

LEE: In the caravan. And half our wages was supposed to go back to Fairbridge and we were got the other half. And when I went to leave there he said, "We own you." And I said, "No bastard owns me."

HILL: How long were you there?

LEE: Five or six months.

HILL: And where did you go?

LEE: Well, I went back to Fairbridge, as far as it goes . . .

HILL: Was there anywhere else you could go?

LEE: No, not at the time.

HILL: You must have hated that – having to go back there?

LEE: Up there, they had party lines. And, as far as using the 'phone goes, well that was not-negotiable, so to ring the likes of Sid who didn't have a 'phone then, it was the same base, it was equivalent of getting in contact . . . so I went back to Fairbridge and Newberry automatically put me into a job at Wellington in a dairy. And I was actually doing that by myself and that was forty-odd cows I think. And running the actual dairy by myself and he was paying the same wages as when I was up at Tottenham, which was a pittance. And me and him locked horns and . . .

HILL: This is the owner of the dairy?

LEE: Yeah, this was the owner. And I decked him and left. And that was that. But in his place, my first bedroom was a caravan, the old metal ones. It had no insulation or nothing, it was like a sauna. Then when he moved his family out to the other property, then I moved into the house which was . . .

HILL: This is at Wellington?

LEE: Yeah. And that house was like England was in the second world war. There was half of it was just crumbled down, the bath – they had no shower – the bath you had to use the old heater rings you used to use for the washing machine for a bath, or just have a cold bath. Mind you, you were bloody working with cattle all day and yeah, it was very basic. I thought they were the sort of good jobs and that got us.

HILL: Was there anybody else there, or were you living by yourself?

LEE: I was by myself and that's what I mean. I was basically managing the dairy by myself.

HILL: A lot of Fairbridge kids have said it was crushing loneliness.

LEE: Oh yeah, very much so. Because once the knew, they would not associate with us. We were there to do their bidding and that was all there was to it.

HILL: Did you feel that you were treated like a second-class citizen?

LEE: No, I didn't feel that way, because we were. It wasn't a matter of feeling that way, we were treated as second-rate. Always have been. And even your best times like is when you see other Fairbridge people because they remember things and you know you don't get that business of they're above you or below you or anything like that. We're all tarred with the same brush, basically. And that's the difference.

If I was the get someone to watch my back, it would be a Fairbridge kid. I know a lot of good people but Fairbridge kids are just there, they're defending their own.

HILL: Was it the closest thing to family that you had?

LEE: It would be, yeah. Definitely. In some cases, I see more of some of the Fairbridge kids than I do of my own brothers. So they are very close.

HILL: You mentioned some memories you had of good times at Fairbridge, like you enjoyed the sport and down the creek with the billy and cooking some Magpies and so on – what were the worst memories you have of Fairbridge? What incidents stand out in your mind, going right back to the beginning?

LEE: Well, the worst memory is like once again, when I was split from my brothers, like as you know I was only four. Always, even in England, where my brothers went, I went. And just Begley, like with his punching and kicking. Who else was . . .

HILL: Did you get hit as a kid much?

LEE: Yeah, by bigger kids as well as a couple of them just sort of stopped you screaming or started screaming. Then they'd say I swore and then I'd get a bar of soap put in my gob.

HILL: You'd get what?

LEE: A bar of soap put in my mouth.

HILL: Who by?

LEE: The Cottage Mother. Mind you, that soap was the soap we used to use and it had a certain amount of caustic in it, it was that old [unclear].

HILL: Did you have good Cottage Mothers?

LEE: A couple of them, yeah. A couple of them.

HILL: Who were the worst?

LEE: Oh well, I had old Ma Johnson. She used to cane you with a horse whip, or a bull whip as she called it, a riding crop.

HILL: How old were you when she was doing that?

LEE: Just about eight or nine I suppose. Begley used to kick the hell out of me and punch me up the dairy.

HILL: He did it to everybody. Everybody speaks badly of Begley.

LEE: I was the horse and cart boy. So I was younger.

HILL: Oh, this is before?

LEE: Yeah, before I was a trainee. I used to be the cart boy which meant I'd be up the dairy and put a harness and cart on the horse and I'd already taken milk down before six o'clock. And he used to come down and he used to find you and we were only bits of kids and we had to lift up bloody ten gallon milk churns, six gallon weren't too bad but ten gallons up on the back of the cart! Mind you, I don't know how we didn't have hernias every month. I swear to God I don't know how we didn't get killed basically. And he made me, I was eight – seven or eight – and when Begley made me kill my first sheep.

HILL: How old were you when you killed your first sheep?

LEE: Seven or eight. And the sheep was bigger than me near and when I fell over – I'd already cut it's throat, but I hadn't broken its neck – and of course, the sheep's still kicking – so Begley turned round and he said, "Kill it. Break its neck, break its neck." And finally I did and with that then he seized and bloody punched and kicked me again because I didn't kill it quick enough. And that's the sort of man he was. But he wasn't a man anyway, I'm far as I'm concerned, he was a sadist.

HILL: It's unbelievable the terrible stories people say about Begley . . .

LEE: Welcome to the world of Begley!

HILL: A nasty piece of work . . .

LEE: Just a sadist, that's all he was.

HILL: Why were you doing a kill at such a young age? Because you were on the . . .

LEE: I was on the cart. I was carting.

HILL: And already they were running short of trainees by then weren't they?

LEE: Yeah. They were getting there, yeah. No, I think they were down to about, that wouldn't have been in your era, so they were down to about six, because the original crews used to be eight. So if they got down to six when you were there, so they'd already dropped two trainees off. By the time they got to bloody me, they'd dropped a bloody hell of a lot more. Three more. It went down.

HILL: What other worst incidents can you remember?

LEE: Oh just some of the sadistic ways the Cottage Mothers and that with the kids. To me, because I was one of the bigger kids at the time and you'd sort of look at the, you should be taking care of the younger ones you know, and you couldn't because you'd be up the dairy or wherever and the Cottage Mothers would come back and the Cottage Mother would be giving kids a hiding or something like that, you know. And they were real sadistic women, very sadistic. Okay, they'd say they weren't trained. Well, they shouldn't have been there without training. That's my idea, anyway. The Child Welfare should have bloody taken care of that. That just wasn't on.

To complain to anyone – you couldn't.

HILL: Yeah, now that's interesting. Was there anybody you could ever turn to while you were at Fairbridge?

LEE: No. No. And if there was, you'd be tentative to even try. Well, I know of one girl, she told me herself, that she was assaulted. Now, she went to the Priest who came to pick her up Communion, and she complained to him and he pulled over the side of the road, told her she was a liar, and then proceeded to do the same bloody thing. Sexually assaulted her. So how were you supposed to tell anybody?

And that's why Fairbridge kids just didn't want to relate to anyone. They'd relate to their own kind.

HILL: I must say that even those people who speak highly of Woods . . .

Woods would never back the kid against the staff member.

LEE: Because, as I say, tunnel vision as far as the staff were concerned . . .

HILL: He must have known that the staff were crook.

LEE: Well, I assume he would have, but at the same time, he . . .

HILL: Couldn't get anybody else?

LEE: That's it basically, I'd say.

HILL: Because I think a lot of the staff were there because they had nowhere else to go. They were desperate people.

LEE: So, basically, they were the best of a bad bunch, so I'd hate to see a bad bunch.

HILL: So, after you left Wellington, the dairy, where did you go then? Were you in touch with your brothers?

LEE: Sid, yeah. I went down to see Sid.

HILL: What were you thinking at this stage about your parents? Did you stop thinking about your parents?

LEE: No, no. I used to write to them. But because I was moving around . . .

HILL: When you were at Fairbridge, did you write a lot?

LEE: Yeah. But the thing is, very few of those letters used to get through because they'd read them and if they didn't like them, into the bin they went.

HILL: Who's they?

LEE: Woods, Harrop.

HILL: I see, so they were reading you mail?

LEE: That's right. They specified what you can write and what you can't write. And see, if you write anything else in it, that's it.

HILL: When you got letters from your Mum and Dad, were they important to you?

LEE: When I got them, yeah. But if they had anything to do with us kids – which we found out when we went and got our records in later years – we found letters from our parents trying to get us back, letters that we never got. So, in other words, they were stopped again.

HILL: Did you ever think your parents were going to follow you out?

LEE: I suppose in the back of my mind the hope was there.

HILL: Did you think that you would go back to England to be with your parents, or they would come here?

LEE: Well, more they'd come here than us go there. See, the only way we really ever got letters like back to Fairbridge, was in High School. And we'd get one of the High

School kids to post them for you. So that would be the only way you'd get any mail out there. See, once again . . . [unclear]

HILL: Looking back on it, how would you describe your feeling about the way Fairbridge brought you up? Are you angry or sad or . . . ?

LEE: Well, basically, I don't go much into that because the reason is it was my home for so many years and it would be no different than a kid that's got his own parents giving him a hiding. And he still goes back because to see his parents.

HILL: Look, I'll come to that in a minute. That's about your relationship today with Fairbridge right? But looking back on it, I mean, would you for example, like your kids to have had the experience you had?

LEE: Oh no. In my opinion there is . . .

HILL: But how would you describe, looking back on Fairbridge, how do you feel about Fairbridge?

LEE: Oh, like everything else, basically I don't sort of have anything really against it and nothing really for it. It's only the friendship with the other kids.

HILL: What do you think could have been done better? Should have been done better?

LEE: Should have been done better – a lot of kids should have been let go to their full potential of what they were capable of doing. Like you had artists in there, you had blokes that were good with crafts, with electronics – they could have gone on and made a million bucks or whatever. That was where they were stopped short.

HILL: Cottage Mothers?

LEE: Cottage Mothers – well, they could have been improved by about one hundred per cent. Because they were no different to the boys to what they were to the girls. The girls used to get [unclear] too. Not only the boys. And so they were just as badly beaten as what the boys were in some cases. And, once again, the girls hadn't got to do something like Nursing and all this sort of thing. You had to be a farmer's wife. That was their opinion. So you were restricted, very restricted in what your capabilities were.

HILL: What was the best thing about Fairbridge?

LEE: Leaving, I suppose.

HILL: You mentioned last time about camaraderie.

LEE: Oh yeah, well the camaraderie amongst the kids amongst themselves, that was the whole crux of your survival. Because, without that, you had nothing. Basically, because, and its kids being able to rely on other kids was a lot better than trying to rely on the adults, because the adults were the ones giving you a hidings, to other kids. And this is where even going to Molong School, Fairbridge kids, if you got into a fight with someone at Molong, "Mum" would have you back. A Fairbridge kid would have you back all the time.

HILL: Finally, you were at Fairbridge for a very long time, weren't you, how long?

LEE: It was thirteen years if you include Knockholt, and that, it's over fourteen and a half years.

HILL: And you would have changed a lot while you were there.

LEE: Oh yeah.

HILL: For the better or worse?

LEE: Well, it got worse. Because like as I say in the trainees and all that were starting to fade, so you got less trainees which meant more workload on what was left. Then come the, instead of being completely self-sufficient, which you used to be, you had parents taking their kids off for a couple of months and taking them back out again, which was restricting the work of the place in itself – not that I blame the parents anyway – but still, the thing is they could have put them in a better place.

HILL: So, by the time you left, there were obviously Australian kids at Fairbridge. Were they different from the other Fairbridge kids?

LEE: Oh yeah. Because they had the relationship with parents outside the Farm, like they would come in of a weekend and they'd them away for the weekend, where we were up the dairy or the kids were up the farm, whichever.

HILL: When this happened and you had a lot of Australian kids because the English kids had dried up, did you think that these Australian kids got better treatment than you?

LEE: Yes. Because of the simple reason is they were expected to do less in the way of working on the dairy and that sort of thing.

HILL: So, they were really only there for school?

LEE: Yeah, basically.

HILL: And they they'd go back with their families after school?

LEE: Yeah. Instead of working on dairy or whatever, they'd go back with their parents.

HILL: So, do you think Fairbridge got better or worse over the time you were there?

LEE: Oh, it wasn't much good when I got there, and it weren't much bloody better when I left.

HILL: How do you think Fairbridge affected you as a Father?

LEE: Well, it made me determined that my kids don't go through what I went through. Like the Courts, they say when you bash the kid you're going to bash when you're older. Well, I haven't known a Fairbridge kid to do it yet. So I'd say that's a big fallacy myself.

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